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ABSTRACT

If superintendent-school board relationships are to be successful, the persons involved must be cognizant, confident, communicative, and compatible. (Author/IRT)

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POSITIVE BOARD-SUPERINTENDENT RELATIONS

A.A.S.A.
Atlantic City, N.J.

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Paul C. Kennedy

First, I want to acknowledge my appreciation of the presence of my friends from Nebraska.

We in that State recognize that an expert is one who is 60 miles or more from home; however, just as there is a minimum on the distance, there too must be a maximum, and at this moment it seems I may have exceeded it. So it's good to have some friends.

In Nebraska, we have our 1,200 school districts which give us some variety in the characteristics; however, it seems appropriate for me to recognize that I am very aware that in the respective districts represented here there is even greater variety.

Regardless of that, there is much that we have in common regarding School Board Superintendent Relations.

I want to thank the program planners for their labelling this session with the Positive aspect. This is somewhat different from the usual reports on conflicts between boards of education and their superintendents.

We are fortunate in Nebraska to have enjoyed positive school board/superintendent relations in many of our districts, especially the larger ones which in some ways provide models for the other districts.

It has been my good fortune to have been in Omaha for the past 21 years and to have enjoyed working with many of these superintendents and board members.

From my experiences and from the reading and studying of this relationship, there are obvious a great number of characteristics which could be contributory; however, for purposes of my remarks I would like to focus on four of them.

The first is cognizant, i.e., the individuals involved are aware, they are turned on, and know what should be happening and what is happening.

Secondly, they are confident, i.e., they have accepted their responsibilities and expect to get their jobs done.

The third characteristic that is imperative is that the school board and the superintendent are communicating. Information, ideas, ambitions, and attitudes have to be on a continual two way band.

The successful school board/superintendent relations are also characterized by compatibility.

By compatible, I mean that the necessary interactions take place without interference in another's action.

So cognizant, confident, compatible, and communicative are four characteristics that seem worth our giving attention; and on each I would like to focus for a few minutes.

A priority of what one should be cognizant of is virtually impossible; however, as one who has subscribed to Ernie Bayles' goal-insight theories for years, I would identify first the need for the school board and the superintendent to be well aware of the goals and objectives for the school district.

The criterion that should be uppermost in the minds of these leaders in their decision-making should be in terms of the consequences on the pupils and students, in other words, "What will this do for the kids?" should be ever present.

Board members usually have differences of opinions among themselves as individuals; however, as a board there should be an agreed-upon set of objectives to which they are committed. These objectives should be a result of the efforts of many ~~present~~ persons, especially the Superintendent.

When I use the word "superintendent," I'm thinking of more than just the one person who occupies that position. The Superintendents' assistants and associates and their respective staffs all figure in the workings of the superintendent.

Just as the board has its differences of opinions, so do these members of the superintendent's staff; however, just as it is important for the board to have its agreed upon set of objectives, so is it important that the Superintendent's staff have its agreed upon positions in their relations with the Board of Education.

Board members and staff members can recognize this fact of pluralism in their respective groups, but as a management team, if they are to provide leadership, their obligations are to respect the differences and work for the goals in common.

Some of the interesting recent research in Kansas and Nebraska has been focused on expectations by different groups of superintendents.

Superintendent Darrell George of Lakin, Kansas, did a thorough study of the competencies of Superintendents as identified by Presidents of Boards of Education.

The results showed that the Board members had differing expectations depending on their ages, their tenure on the Boards, and the size of the districts.

I realize that this study may appear to have no significance for some of you; however, the skill of the Superintendent to "read" this board is an important one.

If the job is to be accomplished, the Board and the Superintendent have to know what it is that they have to work with, and that includes themselves.

Each of us is shaped by the experiences we have had--part of my attitudes come from experiences in athletics and in the infantry where I always was led to expect and did expect to win.

The confidence with which a Board and their Superintendent anticipate has, in my not humble opinion, much to do with whether the job will be accomplished.

I recognize the difficulties confronting many of us--Budgets, buses, babies

and whatever can cause one to wonder, but these should not create a give-up attitude or the tendency to cop out.

In the Midwest we read of situations which seem unsurmountable; however, if one looks down the road, there are no alternatives but to work at the solutions.

Many superintendents have been sacrificed if one judges by the tenure of the chief executives of the 50 largest cities. I don't think that has solved any of the problems.

The tenure of board members is about equal to that of the superintendents. That rapid turnover doesn't indicate continuity. I'm not sure what it indicates with regard to confidence.

But I do know that the Board and the Superintendent have to have the confidence in themselves and in each other and that confidence needs to be communicated. And that is only one of the substances of the communication process.

If the Board is to be cognizant they have to be informed, and the Superintendent can use a variety of techniques and personnel to get this job done.

But it takes a receptivity and a commitment on the parts of Board members.

That Board member who shows up at the Board Meeting or Committee Meeting and after sitting down at the table, rips open the envelope of information is likely to disappoint not only the Superintendent but also other members of the Board.

The sharing of responsibility by the Board and the Superintendent for the communication function is one that has to be worked out. The Superintendent can be put into an awkward position of the total responsibility for the inservice education of the Board falls on the Superintendent.

The experienced members of the Board can be more contributory to the Relations if they help new board members get oriented. They can also help

business discussions by expressing themselves on various positions. This division of labor is one that develops with practice and it shouldn't become a question of territoriality.

In contrast to that question, the last characteristic to which I would like to make a few comments is compatible.

By compatible, I mean that persons can work together without getting into the way of the other.

This demarcation between Board Members' roles and administrators' roles isn't always clearcut, but it can be understood if there is proper communication.

The National School Boards Association has a couple films--On Board and Board Actions. One of their suggestions is that if the Superintendent is in doubt as to whether his actions are appropriate for the Superintendent or if it's a board matter, he should ask the Board.

By the same token, if the Board or a board member is in doubt, it should be brought to the consideration of the Superintendent.

This kind of compatibility is preferred to the surprises. Once the ship hits the sand it's more difficult to back up and try to steer another course.

It's difficult to determine how many fractures the Board/Superintendent relations can survive; however, those that can be avoided should be.

Boards of Education and Superintendents have their respective stakes in this endeavor of education, just as many others, like students, teachers, parents, and patrons, also have a big stake in the education process.

However, the Board of Education and the Superintendent occupy those positions of prominence that carry with them particular penalties.

Nevertheless, they also have their accompanying ego-vitamins and other rewards, i.e., they are where the action is.

So if they are cognizant, confident, communicating, and compatible, there are many opportunities for successes. But to take advantage of the

opportunities, appropriate preparations have to be made.

Dr. Bresnahan, a friend of mine, defined luck as the meeting of preparation and opportunity, if you'll buy that definition--Good luck!

Paul C Kennedy